

Rishabh Dagar

Status Anxiety

The fundamental problem with society today lies in the notion that happiness is linked to monetary prosperity; along with the idea that a more equal and economically level society will make people happy being extremely flawed. In the old days, large swaths of the population remained at home (women) and competition was very limited as major technological advancements seldom occurred. Making individuals who became very good at their jobs extremely valuable and rare, as human efficiency was the only real area of possible growth. Thereby rendering the macro economy very stable, but rigid with regards to social mobility. Whilst today's American society reveals, super low unemployment rates, constant technological innovation, an extremely educated work force, along with an unceasing inflow of immigrants (skilled and unskilled) resulting in fierce competition. With even the super low 5.5 percent unemployment rate being partially composed of frictional unemployment (transitioning between companies), thus making the real unemployment rate even lower. Now, knowing all this, it would be only natural to suggest that some of the unhappiness experienced today is owed to extreme pressure resulting from unparalleled competition for a limited number of top spot jobs. Which ultimately results in a society where individuals are constantly under pressure, from politicians, from competition at work, and the American dream (which I will address very soon).

The American Dream is the idea that anyone could attain their own version of success in a society where upward mobility is possible for everyone, provided one makes sacrifices, takes risks, and works hard rather than relying on luck (more specifics in paragraph four) or charity. However, with this ever-increasing competition the standards for the hard-work and sacrifices one must be willing to endure continuously increases as well; that too at an historically unmatched rate. With the number of skills individuals need to master to stay competitive increasing (Email, MS office, coding, etc). All of

which are things greatly beneficial to a society premised upon free-market principles, as the standards of living experience a constant and consistent growth. However, this then creates a dilemma in which any failure can be attributed directly to one's lack of drive and hard work. Thus, making society as a whole a lot more consumerist, as everyone is attempting to show off how hard they work through the display of material possessions. Which then naturally results in constant comparisons with those around oneself, in efforts to reassess the relative position one occupies in the meritocratic hierarchy.

Society's establishment of the idea that one is equal with everyone else and that success (which is often measured by wealth) is proportional to the amount of work one puts in, combined with individuals' proclivity to compare with all those around then evolves naturally into jealousy and envy. Whilst most individuals are sensible enough to realise that superstars and multibillionaires often have qualities that they themselves do not, they unfortunately at the same time also realise that a similar statement therefore cannot be made for those who one sees as their equal (in terms of competence). Which could be individuals one attended schools with, occupied the same position as in the office, or maybe even just lives in the same neighbourhood as. Thus, making it exceedingly difficult to explain the promotions or minor successes of such individuals, without eventually having to identify some shortcoming in oneself; the rejection and suppression of which then results in even high levels of jealousy and envy with one's peers. Which then once again results in the regression to consumerism to prove one's self-worth not only to the world, but more importantly to oneself. Much of these factors also contribute to the inability of individuals to simply work jobs at minimum wage and instead drives them to strive for more. Recognising this problem amongst the poor middle-class individuals, the advertising department at corporations start rolling out products suited to satiate this inner psychological hunger for validation. However, instead of solving the problem these ads only result in producing a society in which individuals

jump from product to product in search of satisfaction, and frankly a distraction from themselves and their thoughts.

Much of the previously referred to worrying is also a result of modern mantras such as “winners make their own luck”. Which also seems to further solidify the idea that the world is a race and anyone who works hard enough can win it. With the latter part of the statement stripping away the last slither of hope individuals had to justify their short comings with. Thus, placing even more weight on the individual as they continue running. While individuals in the pre-industrialised world used to have all sorts of things to blame their failures on, medication, social classes, and of course fate in addition to luck; all of which allowed them to accept the status quo without guilt and shame (at least not as a result of the discussed topic). In fact, this phenomena of morphing everything to fit the American Dream was so powerful that it even affected religion in the United States; effectively crossing the religious excuse off the list as well. While people in the old-world order would have considered lack of material possessions a possible display of piety, contemporary ideas such as “riches are the by-product of walking with god” have disposed of that as well. Thus, making wealth not only a valid method of judging one’s merits and hard work but also devoutness and commitment to god.

High status for most people today is reflected in the ability of an individual to purchase anything their heart desires without any real worry of cost or practicality. Whether that be buying thousand-dollar sneakers, wearing bejewelled teeth grilles, or wearing designer brands like Louis Vuitton, Gucci, and Yves Saint Lauren, to name but a few. Effectively replacing the traditional notions of a cultured upbringing, high levels of scholarship, and one’s company. With the sole role of wealth being its unavoidable necessity to make the aforementioned lifestyle sustainable. However, the commonality amongst the aforementioned two different approaches to high status may possibly be this idea of exclusivity. As regardless of the way the two approaches express themselves, with the former primarily

through display of material and the latter through display of gentility, both are deemed exclusive and rare in their respective time periods. With I of course favouring the latter as a more accurate measure of status due to its multivariate nature; unlike the former, which is purely based upon the, previously discussed, consumerist display of success.

Before the conclusion, a brief remark about one's identity and its affiliation with those by whom one is surrounded. Whereas most would see this affiliative style of personal identity as a negative state or quality, for it appears to essentially invest your identity and worth in those around you. One may also conversely interpret this affiliative style of identity to indeed be very useful mechanism. For it essentially enables one to quickly gauge how far or near they are from their ideal lifestyle. With this view being best summarised by the maxim – “you are the sum of your three best friends”. Thus, leading me to conclude that it is not particularly necessary to rid oneself of all peer, social, affiliative connections since you would also lose this potentially brilliant tool; but it is certainly important to keep the usage of this tool, much like any other tool, to a level determined by necessity and not desire.